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ABSTRACT

This issue of the NCEDL Spotlight Series newsletter adds California and Ohio to a re-analysis of findings from an earlier report looking at the move to establish a state pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds in Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina, and Texas. Key figures in political and educational circles in these seven states were interviewed to determine the major facilitators to the policy shift, the barriers to be overcome, and strategies used to make this policy shift. Commonalities among the seven states were identified: (1) each state made a major effort to bring together the major programs already in place for 4-year-olds; (2) a variety of wraparound services from other agencies were integrated into the program to comprise a full-day program at the local level; (3) funds for building the infrastructure to provide quality programs needed to start in earlier stages of the programs; and (4) political leadership was absolutely necessary when public support was lukewarm. Differences among the seven states related to: (1) financing for the programs; (2) size of the state complicating and multiplying the needs of pre-kindergarten programs; (3) increasing population diversity creating special challenges for pre-kindergarten programs; (4) implementation schedule in moving toward universal preschool; and (5) distractions provided by economic downturns and loss of political leadership. (KB)

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Frank Porter Graham Center
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

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NCEDL Spotlights

No. 34 January 2002

Pre-K initiatives in 2 more states

This Spotlight is based on a 20-page supplement to Technical Report # 2 (Education for four-year olds: State initiatives) by James J. Gallagher, Jenna R. Clayton and Sarah E. Heinemeier of NCEDL. The supplement, the original technical report, and this Spotlight are all online under "Products" at our web site <http://www.ncedl.org>.

How 2 more states implement pre-K programs

New NCEDL analysis adds California and Ohio to our earlier report that looks at a major educational shift in the past five years — the move by many states to establish a pre-K program for four-year-olds. The earlier report examined how Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina and Texas are developing their pre-K programs.

Key figures in political and educational circles in these 7 states were interviewed to determine the major facilitators to this policy shift, the barriers to be overcome, and strategies used to make this policy shift.

These 7 states are well on the way to universal pre-K as soon as they find a way to finance the programs. Public schools in these states have accepted yet another responsibility, and this educational reform movement for young children continues.

Differences among the 7 states

- **Financing** Despite the progress displayed by the states studied in developing pre-K programs there remains a concern that the funding in some states is not included in the base state budget, but must be considered yearly. In times of good economic development this is not a problem, but if the economy turns sour what happens to these limited commitments? One state, Georgia, has successfully used a lottery for funding but other states are dubious or reluctant to adopt this method.
- **Size** The size of the large states complicates and multiplies the many needs of these pre-K programs. The problems of California and Texas are of a different order than South Carolina and Ohio. Think of what is needed to establish a network of personnel preparation centers for early childhood. Care must be taken that various regions of the large states are all included. The sheer numbers of teachers that are needed are a problem in their own right. Technical assistance becomes a complex network of programs rather than a simple and direct service as can be done in smaller states.
- **Diversity** The increasing diversity of the population creates special challenges for education and for pre-K programs. If a child does not speak English, then what needs to be done to help him/her get ready for school? If there are disagreements between the school programs and the attitudes of the families involved, then

Commonalities among the 7 states

- **Collaboration** In each of the seven states studied, the leaders in this pre-K movement were faced with the problem that there already were many programs in place for four-year-olds. These programs had been established for different reasons, and at different times, in the past. In each state, a major effort was made to bring these together in a spirit of collaboration with the new pre-K policies. For the most part, these efforts were successful and most of those professionals and parents concerned with early childhood were made a part of this program.
- **Full Day, Full Year** Although many of these pre-K policies began as half-day programs it became clear that full-day programs were needed for working parents and welfare mothers. A variety of wraparound services from other agencies were integrated into the program to comprise, in effect, a full-day program at the local level.
- **Lack of Infrastructure** One typical way to calculate program cost is to multiply the cost of one child times the number of children one expects to serve. Such an approach always underestimates the true cost since it leaves out many resources and infrastructure

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Differences, continued

how are they to be resolved? Cultural diversity in the child population creates an added challenge to the planning and programming. Although all states feel this issue to some degree, it is obvious that some states feel this pressure a great deal more than others.

- **Implementation Schedule** In each of the seven states there was a stated intent by many interviewers that their state should be moving towards universal pre-K. These programs would not be mandatory but would be available to parents who wish to use them.

  Georgia has largely moved to universal pre-K due to the use of the lottery. Others like New York have a time schedule for moving to universal pre-K that will almost surely not be reached in the timeframe proposed because of the major costs involved in such a transition. Others like Illinois and Texas seem to be biding their time waiting for the right combination of circumstances, a favorable budget situation and public clamor in order to make the move to universal pre-K programs.

  The problem seems to be two-fold: the lack of an expanding economy that would create uncommitted dollars to this program and a more aggressive public attitude demanding that this be accomplished. Perhaps when the step to universal programs were taken there would be increased public support since more people would see that it was in their self interest and the interests of their own children, a view that they do not hold now because the program is restricted to at-risk children.

- **Distractions** Sometimes events apart from the program may have a serious effect on the program. A current court ruling in Ohio that their financing of public schools is unconstitutional is certain to have a sobering effect on pre-K programs, since additional funds may be needed to comply with the court ruling. Economic downturns and loss of political leadership would be two other distractions that could be counted upon to cause distress for those supporting pre-K programs.

Commonalities, continued

that are needed. For example, where are the trained personnel needed for such a program coming from? Who will train them and who pays? Where are the data systems to determine needs and plans for the future? Who will pay for such systems? Where are the technical assistance programs to help local programs in short-term training and consultation on difficult problems?

It is understandable that public decision-makers, faced with the problem of allocating scarce resources to almost unlimited needs, attempt to provide the minimum funds necessary for fundamental service and hope they can add to those funds in the future. But if we are serious about our goal of helping children at risk for school failure, the infrastructure to provide quality programs needs to start in the earlier stages of the program. Otherwise, we are in the equivalent position of providing 5 mg of medicine (pre-K program minus trained personnel and infrastructure) when it takes 25 mg to have ar. effect on the patient.

- **Public Support** Some of those interviewed expressed concern about whether the public was really on board of this pre-K concept. That may be part of the reason for the absolutely essential role played by political leadership in the development of these pre-K programs. There has been no visible groundswell of public demand for these programs, merely a passive acceptance of the need. Such lukewarm public support does not generate a high priority in spending public tax revenue.

  A substantial job lies ahead for advocates to point out the virtues and long-term economies of such programs to the general public.

If you want to know more:

- Gallagher, J., Clayton, J. & Heinemeier, S. (2001). *Education for four-year-olds: State Initiatives.* Chapel Hill: NCEDL online at <www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-tr.pdf>
- Gallagher, J. & Clifford, R. (2000). The missing support infrastructure in early childhood. *Early Childhood Research and Practice,* 2(1), 1-24.
- Gallagher, J., Rooney, R. & Campbell, S. (1999). Child care licensing regulations and child care quality in four states. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly 14,* #3, 313-333

Editor's note: This *Spotlight* should be read in conjunction with *Spotlight* #29, which has more details on the states as well as advice to states wishing to begin or extend their pre-K programs.

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